

EPA out to screen 25 homes each day

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Special to the Inter Lake

LIBBY — Environmental Protection Agency teams are scheduled next month to begin screening Libby-area homes for asbestos contamination.

The crews will study 25 properties a day and won't stop until roughly 3,000 homes have been checked off the list.

The work will have to be "realistic, practical and efficient," EPA remedial project manager Jim Christiansen told the Community Advisory Group last Thursday. "We feel that we have to look at all of the properties in the Libby valley."

To get that done, the screening won't be as thorough as some preliminary investigations conducted by

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the agency, Christiansen said. That would cost more than \$16 million.

"I don't have that much money, and I don't want to spend it on sampling," he said. "If I have it, I want to spend it on cleanup."

Several two-person teams will canvass neighborhoods looking for sources of contamination. If vermiculite mined near Libby is known to be present either in the soil or in the house as Zonolite insulation, some level of contamination will be assumed.

"I think we have said Zonolite's safe in the past," Christiansen said. "We're not saying it here."

The teams also will ask homeowners questions, such as whether anyone who worked at the vermiculite mine ever lived in the home. Soil sampling —

using a very low detection limit — will be conducted at all properties, Christiansen said, but indoor air samples won't be taken if there is no obvious source of contamination.

To prioritize cleanup activities, properties will be placed in broad categories based on the amount of contamination — "none," "some" or "lots," Christiansen said.

The screening work is one of the early stages of the EPA's long-term cleanup of Libby. It will overlap with ongoing work being done by the agency's removal program, Christiansen said.

The removal program focuses

on simpler but high-risk sites needing a quick response; the remedial program takes on longer, more complicated projects.

The process of adding Libby to the EPA's National Priorities List is moving ahead to ensure continued funding through the remedial program. Christiansen said he expects formal listing sometime this summer.

"The process has started, and you won't see a break from the time we start cleanup this summer until the time we're done," he said.

Medical studies also are scheduled this year as part of a risk assessment that will help

the EPA develop criteria for Libby cleanup, Christiansen said. Studies of cancer risks will continue, and noncancer health risks will be researched using laboratory mice.

A record of decision on cleanup criteria is expected in the winter of 2004, Christiansen said, and work is expected to be finished in 2006-2007.